

ENERGY AND VISION

San Francisco / Donna Brookman

A ten-year survey of Oliver Jackson's exuberant and compelling work has been assembled this month at Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery. Included in the exhibit are several large oil paintings dating from 1978 to the present, a sampling of Jackson's marble and wood sculpture and a recent series of intaglio drypoints, ink drawings and paintings on paper. A close look reveals a fascinating evolution of ideas and techniques in these works.

Dominating the exhibition are the large, brilliantly colorful oil paintings in the main gallery. The earliest of these, *Untitled 11.78*, reflects Jackson's fascination with jazz, both as subject matter and as an inspiration for abstract mark making. In this work, crudely drawn figures are immersed in—and nearly obliterated by—a deluge of rhythmic red and orange strokes. With its pulsating energy and intense color, the painting is a visual equivalent of the experience of music.

The minimal figures in *Untitled 6.2.81* are similarly almost eclipsed by the broad rhythmic strokes surrounding them. Both paintings have a highly abstract quality, with an emphasis placed on the energy and immediacy of the gesture. By contrast, *Untitled No. 10* (1979) depicts a circle of musicians isolated in a white ground. The interlocking, nearly abstract forms of the group form a counterpoint to the simplified pattern of the "audience" in the foreground. This painting emphasizes the rhythmic interaction within the two groups and, particularly, the closeness of the musicians.

The theme of shared human experience becomes increasingly important in Jackson's work of the mid 1980s. There is a movement away from abstract mark making and toward clearer figurative content. Although the figures are still sketchily drawn and often dominated by the color and activity surrounding them, they embrace, dance, grieve and dream in a colorful and occasionally confusing world. In *Untitled 6.11.84* the relationship of the two central figures is dramatized by the brilliant yellow field between them, the secondary pair of figures pulling at them, and the puttilike figure overhead. Most of the figures are lightly brushed in, and the areas

of color surrounding them become an important element of the work. This pronounced tension between figure and ground, which undermines the conventional dominance and insularity of the figure, is a key element of Jackson's work.

At times the paintings are a wild cacophony of figures, objects and motion, as in *Untitled 7.23.86*, with its precariously tilted and fragmented world. Others, such as *Untitled 7.29.86* are joyous evocations of sunlight, flowers and dance. The energy and conviction of this painting saves it from cliché. A similarly colorful and lyrical painting (*Untitled 7.20.87*), however, lapses into sentimentality with its flaccid figures, flowers and white bird. In all of these paintings, the critical element is the feeling of commitment to the image. Jackson takes considerable risks, and in most cases the result is very convincing. Occasionally, as in the case of this painting, the tension that contributes to the success of his work is lacking.

After the emphatic energy of the paintings, the drawings and sculpture in the adjoining room provide a quieter but even more rewarding experience. A series of ink

drawings and paintings on paper focus on the expressive possibilities of the human figure with refreshing clarity and simplicity. Some of the drawings depict realistic groupings of figures; others move toward abstraction as they explore rhythm and interval. These are eloquent and highly concentrated studies whose considerable refinement of line and technique reflects a vision of increasing subtlety and complexity.

A fine series of etchings and three large sculptures complete the exhibit. The most compelling of the sculptures is the massive *Untitled No. 1* (1983). Here a block of marble is partially carved away to reveal fragments of figures within. Rhythmic evidence of the carving process, as well as the dramatic use of the uncarved stone, echoes some of the concerns in Jackson's paintings. The figure seems to be emerging from or contained by the stone, and the tension of that opposition is vital to the work.

In all of these media Jackson reveals a continuity of vision and emotional intensity that deserve respect. As his work grows increasingly subtle and complex, we can look ahead with anticipation to the next ten years. □



Oliver Jackson, *Untitled No. 10*, oil enamel on cotton canvas, 81"x 115", at Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree.